The Thing with Feathers

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The Thing with Feathers

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Summary

Every morning, Will slips into a Ravenstag pen owned by Hannibal, the town apothecary, to collect pretty feathers from the grass. He uses the feathers in crafts he sells at the market, where he's befriended a scarlet-scaled dragon called Francis. The day Will and Hannibal finally meet face-to-face, everything changes . . . for both of them. A fluffy fantasy AU!

Notes

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Title is a reference to the Emily Dickinson poem.

Chapter 1

The grass was wet with morning dew under Will's bare feet as he tromped up the hill. The sun was just beginning to wake up, painting the dark sky with a twilight glow. No birds were singing yet, the air quiet and still. But the Ravenstags would be grazing.

He made it over the hill and bounded down, picking up speed as he went. In no time, the pen was in sight, and sure enough, three black beauties stood inside, feathers shimmering even in the low light. Will slowed his pace and stepped quietly as he drew near, creeping up to the wooden fence and slipping underneath.

One of the three, the smallest of the bunch, glanced curiously over at him as he came in, blinking her dark eyes.

"Don't mind me," he whispered. "Just here for some feathers."

The Ravenstag regarded him for a moment and then seemed to nod before returning to breakfast. He didn't know of any other herd animals that grazed before dawn, but Ravenstags weren't like any other animals he'd ever seen. The three before him belonged to the town apothecary, who lived in the cottage up the path from the pen—Hannibal Lecter was his name, an eccentric sort of man, and Will had only ever seen him from afar. Which was perfectly fine.

He got to his task of poking around the pen, snatching up feathers the stags had shed as they grazed. Their pitch black feathers were longer and more iridescent than any from a bird, and they'd fetch him a pretty coin in the market if he gathered enough. And today there were plenty. It was best to get them while they were freshly fallen, before they'd been trampled and broken, so slipping in just before sunrise was perfect timing.

Will tucked his handful of feathers into the sack he had slung over his shoulder and slipped out of the pen in under two minutes. He watched the Ravenstags grazing for a while more. The sun was starting to peak over the horizon, and their feathers glistened with a rainbow sheen. He couldn't help but wonder how Hannibal had come to own them. But no matter. He leapt and nabbed an apple from Hannibal's tree as he left, biting into the perfectly crisp fruit as he made his way to the market.

Will's wheeled cart was chained to a tree just off the roadside, and with a flick of his finger, the lock popped open. He left the chain in the grass and pushed the cart over to his usual spot on the dirt path, just a stone's throw from the market shops. A few store owners were out, sweeping their steps. Will took off his bag and pulled open the flap, taking out his wares for the day one by one, tossing them into the air so that each could take its rightful place on his stand. Next, he took up the handful of feathers and floated them swiftly into place, each sticking snug into his flower crowns, brooches, lures, and other assorted pretties, giving them just the right touch of sparkle.

All set, he turned his gaze to the sign at the top of his cart, and it unfastened and unrolled itself, proudly displaying his shop name in bold red cursive: *The Wolf Trap*. Truth be told, the

sign had already been attached to the cart when he'd come to own it, and he knew nothing of its original meaning. But it suited him fine.

With everything situated, he kicked back on his stool, resting his dirty feet on the cart, and watched signs of life starting to appear in the market. No sooner was he lost in an idle daydream than heavy footsteps came up behind him and a puff of warm breath billowed through his curls. He turned around to find a scaly red snout in his face.

"Good morning, Francis," Will said. "Down from the mountain early, I see."

Francis was a small, scarlet-scaled dragon, standing no taller than the modest town buildings when walking on all fours. He snorted in agreement and settled down in his usual spot next to Will's cart. Francis seemed to like spending at least part of the day in Will's company, and the feeling was mutual. As far as Will knew, Francis was the only dragon in the area, making him something of an outsider. Will could relate. He felt like they understood that about each other. Besides, the dragon's presence had the bonus of attracting more curious buyers, which Will knew was not lost on his friend. "Francis," was not his actual name, of course, but a close approximation of how he'd introduced himself in dragonspeak, which no humans aside from the most powerful wizards could comprehend. Likewise, dragons couldn't make sense of the common tongue unless spoken by those with magic. Will's magic happened to be just enough for Francis—and most creatures—to grasp his meaning, which he was glad of, even if their chats were a bit one-sided.

"Did it look like much traffic coming in today?" Will asked. "From what you could see?"

Francis hummed and raised his horned brow optimistically. Will smiled and reached over to pat his head. The dragon leaned into his touch.

"Sounds like we'll have a good day."

Across the way and up a few buildings, a pair of gold, glittering wings shone in the morning light as Reba opened up her shop doors for the day. She was a sightless fairy who could find her way on scent and sound alone, and she made the most delicious-smelling candles and soaps in the land. Passers-through often left her shop with basketfuls, and with good reason.

Then there were the other shops and pubs selling everything from groceries and hunting supplies to paper parcels and rare liquors. Their little stretch of town saw heavy traffic from travelers going North toward the mountains and South toward the great cities. Those headed North for hunting and fishing were easy to entice with supplies, while the city-bound travelers were often eager for a chance to stretch their legs and pick up refreshments or charming gifts.

During lulls in the foot traffic, Will would kick back and construct his crowns and crafts by hand. Weaving them out of multiple materials at once was complex, delicate work that needed a closer eye before he added finishing accents with his magic. Directly across the road was another cart selling rocks of all sizes carved to look just like skulls, run by two locals called Brian and Jimmy. On days when they and Will both managed to fully sell out their carts, they'd celebrate by visiting one of the pubs after dark.

This particular day, Sheriff Katz came around with extra muffins for all of them, even tossing one to Francis. She was the friendly type. And Will managed to sell more than half his wares by the time the sky was shifting from blue to orange. It was a good day.

After re-securing his cart to the tree off the road, Will headed home, strolling along the riverbank toward his little house. It was a simple single-room cottage nestled in a grove of trees just a few paces from the water. Nothing much, but it suited him fine, and he enjoyed the fresh air. He checked the makeshift fishing poles he kept planted in the bank and found two plump trout to take inside for supper. He'd make a pot of stew, which he'd share with the handful of forest cats that had adopted him, and then he'd pass out on his cot surrounded by purring floofs. As usual. And then he'd get up and do it all over again.

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Will awoke to petrichor and a gray blanket over the sky, strong winds rustling the trees outside. It was still dry, but not for long. He hopped out of bed and pulled on his vest and bag, hurrying out the door. Rain could mean a slower day at the market, but it was good news for the shallow river. The breeze tossed his curls about as he bounded up the hill, but he stopped short when he got to the top. At the base, in the rippling green grass, stood a Ravenstag. He recognized it at once as the smallest of the bunch.

"What are you doing all the way over here?" he whispered, starting cautiously toward her.

She turned her head to him, seemingly ready to bolt.

"Easy now," he said, his voice calm but firm. "You know me. I'm a friend."

She seemed to relax just a bit, her eyes fixed on him as he approached.

"Did you get lost?"

The Ravenstag huffed as if in answer. Her feathers flapped wildly in the wind like so many flustered little birds. Will was close enough to touch, and he reached out his hand toward her face. He expected her to recoil, but instead, she met his palm with her cheek and rubbed the black fur of her face across his skin, closing her eyes. Friends. Will smiled.

"Come on, then, I'll show you the way back," he said, and she fell in line beside him as he guided her home.

When the pen was in sight, Will's breath caught. The apothecary himself, Hannibal, was there in the flesh, wrangling the other two Ravenstags into the pen. The one walking with Will stopped when he did.

"Well, go on. You're home now."

She lunged forward and rubbed his cheek with hers, and Will laughed. "Alright, alright."

Reluctantly, he walked her the rest of the way to the gate. Hannibal took notice of them and came out to guide her inside. Once in, she bounded over to the other two and they huddled together under their awning on the far side of the pen.

“Thank you for returning her,” Hannibal said, turning to Will. He spoke with an accent, his voice surprisingly soft. “The gate came off in the wind and she must have been spooked.”

Will nodded, his own voice suddenly gone from him. Hannibal was uniquely stunning, with features at once gentle and subtly alluring. Will had never seen him up close, and now he was just steps away from his striking cheekbones and amber-brown eyes, partly obscured by locks of graying hair the wind tossed across his face.

“I don’t believe we’ve ever properly met,” Hannibal went on, extending his hand. “I’m Hannibal.”

“Will,” he said. Hannibal’s hand was warm.

“You’re a warlock, aren’t you?” Hannibal asked next, as though it were a natural progression.

Will was a bit taken aback, but he realized Hannibal must have noticed how the Ravenstag responded to him. He ran a hand over his hair out of habit. “Nothing so powerful, I’m afraid. I’ve only a touch of magic, myself.”

A slight smile warmed Hannibal’s features, as though Will had said something charming or clever. For a moment, they just regarded each other, and then Hannibal gazed over at the now calm Ravenstags.

“What do you do with the feathers?”

Hannibal didn’t sound angry, only curious, but Will’s cheeks flushed hot. He hadn’t been as stealthy as he’d imagined. “I make things. I have a cart at the market.”

Hannibal nodded. “I’ll make a point to come visit sometime.”

“If you’d rather I didn’t take them—”

Will was interrupted by a rumble of thunder; the sky had grown darker since he’d arrived.

“You’re more than welcome to them,” Hannibal replied. “Perhaps you’d like to come in for breakfast while the storm passes?”

“Oh, that’s not nec—”

“It’s the least I can do to show my gratitude.”

It took Will a moment to recall what Hannibal was grateful for. He wouldn’t decline the offer of a free meal twice. “That sounds lovely.”

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The sky broke open as Will sat at Hannibal’s kitchen table. Whatever Hannibal was cooking was starting to smell torturously delicious, and Will was thankful for the sound of the downpour to drown out his growling stomach.

It was a bit surreal to be sitting there in the quaint kitchen, flanked by wooden shelves bearing dozens of leather-bound journals, trinkets, and glass jars and vases holding an assortment of neatly kept plants—herbs, perhaps. The window offered a picturesque view of the pen and river below. Somehow Will hadn't imagined such a charming space inside the mysterious house.

Hannibal appeared carrying a tray to the table, his sleeves rolled up above his strong forearms.

"Thank you," Will said, and Hannibal smiled before turning to retrieve something else.

In an instant, Will's focus was on the food in front of him, and he very nearly drooled on it. It had been ages since he'd had a hot breakfast. Fluffy scrambled eggs mixed with sausage, a bowl of thick porridge with diced fruit and nuts, plus a glass of fresh juice. Waiting to begin eating was a struggle with food right in front of him, but he was a guest in Hannibal's house.

Hannibal returned with a pitcher of the same juice and a bowl of apples, placing them in the center of the table. Will's cheeks went warm at the sight of the apples—if Hannibal knew about the feathers . . .

"No need to wait," Hannibal said. "Eat now, while it's warm."

Will didn't need to be told twice. He fell upon the breakfast, relishing every mouthful of buttery eggs and sweet porridge, gulping juice in between. He only paused when he realized Hannibal had just sat down across from him and his own dishes were half empty.

"It's delicious," Will said, suddenly self-conscious of the way he been hunching over his plate.

"I'm glad you like it," Hannibal said with the same warm smile. "You're welcome to join me for breakfast anytime."

Will swallowed another sip of juice and gave a polite nod. Surely Hannibal wouldn't want him showing up for food every day. He gazed out the little window, streaked with raindrops.

"Where did you get them?" Will asked, changing the subject. "The Ravenstags, I mean."

"I rescued them," Hannibal said with a casual fondness. "Through my work, I came across a supplier who had caught a handful that he planned to kill and sell the parts—the blood and feet alone can fetch a fortune on some markets, and you know firsthand how people like the feathers. He had them in a dark barn. I took one look at them and asked him his price for all five. As you've gathered, I couldn't afford all five. He wouldn't budge. So, I ended up with three. They seem happy here. And they're safe."

Will nodded, quietly moved by Hannibal's story. "And you don't plan to . . . use them?"

Hannibal shook his head, unbothered by the question. "Not until they pass of natural causes, if that happens in my lifetime. While they're healthy, their saliva makes a crucial ingredient in certain elixirs, and that I can sample painlessly."

Will nodded again. Hannibal resumed eating and Will averted his eyes, realizing he'd been staring.

"How long have you lived in the village?" Hannibal asked after a moment.

"Ah, going on a few years now," Will said with a shrug. "I was meant to be passing through, but well . . . I'm not in a hurry. In any case, I like it here."

Hannibal held his gaze, his features warm again. "I'm glad you've found it to your liking."

The rain had let up by the time Hannibal collected their dishes. Will stood to grab his bag and make a polite exit, thanking Hannibal for something like the dozenth time. Hannibal was quickly at his side, getting the door for him. He turned to Will in the threshold and extended his hand.

"I'm very pleased to have met you, Will," Hannibal said.

Will took Hannibal's hand, expecting a polite shake, but Hannibal surprised him by lifting his hand and pressing his lips to Will's knuckles. At the precise moment of contact, a glass vase leapt off a high shelf behind them and shattered on the floor.

Will wrenched his hand away, inelegant. "I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. I should go."

Hannibal was giving him a curious look. Will turned and ducked out the door.

"Will," Hannibal started, but Will was already down the steps and in the grass.

"Thank you for breakfast," Will called back. "I'm truly sorry for the vase."

"I do hope you'll come back soon," Hannibal called after him.

Will tromped on to the market, bare feet squishing in the fresh mud. Hannibal had been sweet, perfectly sweet, so it naturally followed that Will had ended the visit by breaking something and running away. He swore he could still feel Hannibal's lips on his hand. . . . The gesture had been oddly formal, for the setting—besides, if anyone should have been kissing someone's hand, it was Will in gratitude for Hannibal sharing his meal with him. When he made it to his cart, he rubbed his hands over his face and tried to put all the awkwardness out of his mind. At least his belly was full. Never mind that he was low on feathers.

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Will had dozed off in his chair during a lull in the crowds when Francis nudged him awake and flicked his gaze down the road. Will followed with his own eyes and saw a handsome man with graying hair headed right for him. He sat up straight. Apparently Hannibal had been serious about visiting. And he was carrying a basket.

"Good afternoon, Will," he said as he stepped up to the cart.

Will cleared his throat and nodded. “It’s been so long.”

Hannibal had the good nature to laugh. “Who’s your friend?”

“Oh, this is Francis,” Will said, turning toward the dragon. “Francis, this is Hannibal.”

Francis gave a friendly snort. Hannibal smiled. “A pleasure to meet you.”

Hannibal stepped around to the side of the cart, then, and held out the covered basket he was carrying. “I brought you something.”

Will stood to take it. Setting it on the side of the cart, he pulled the covering off to find five thick bundles of feathers—perfectly preserved and tied up with nice twine.

“Oh, heavens,” he breathed.

“Saved from their grooming. You’ll have more use for them than I.”

Will looked up, unsure of what to say. “This is so generous. . . . Please, allow me to repay you,” he said, reaching for his coin pouch.

“Oh, Will, no. I intended for it to be a gift.”

Will straightened up and nodded. “Well, thank you. Much appreciated.”

“My pleasure,” Hannibal said with a small bow.

Will took stock of his cart. “Perhaps you’d like to see them in action?”

Hannibal looked confused but agreed all the same. Will smirked and slid a palmful of feathers out of one of Hannibal’s neat bundles. They were thick and absurdly glittery in the sunlight, the type he’d have been lucky to find on any of his morning scavenges. Taking them up like darts to make a show of it, he flung them into place one by one, embellishing each of his crafts with perfect precision. It wasn’t often that he had an audience.

“How remarkable,” Hannibal said with maybe too much sincerity.

Will mock-bowed and then laughed at himself. “Take one if you like. Any of them. A gift.”

Hannibal smiled in response and then stepped around to the front of the cart, studying Will’s creations with a careful eye.

“You truly have an eye for beauty,” he said, taking up a brooch in his hand. “This one, if that’s alright.”

“It’s yours.”

Hannibal pinned the brooch to his dark vest. It suited him more than Will expected, black feathers emerging from behind small dried leaves, bound together at the base with wrapped

twine, secured with a single silver bead. Hannibal regarded him, then, his smile falling a little more serious.

“I’m very glad our paths crossed this morning. It’s not often I have such pleasant company. I hope I wasn’t too forward before you left.”

“Oh, you weren’t,” Will said, running a hand over his hair. “You only surprised me. That’s all. I had a nice time. Sorry again for the vase.”

Hannibal gave him a look. “I don’t care about the vase.”

“That’s lucky,” Will said with a smirk and a shrug.

Hannibal’s gaze was unwavering, the air abruptly choked between them.

“Perhaps you’d like to join me for supper some evening?” Hannibal asked, charmingly cautious. “Next week, if you’re free?”

“Well, you are ripping me away from eating fish stew with my cats for the hundredth time, but I suppose I’ll manage.”

Hannibal smiled. “Brilliant. And what do you like to eat?”

Will shrugged. “Anything but fish stew, to be honest.”

Hannibal laughed with him. “I’ll manage.”

The foot traffic was starting to pick up, then, and Hannibal made his goodbyes. After he’d gone, Will looked over at Francis, who made a show of looking everywhere else.

“Don’t say anything,” Will snapped.

Francis hummed in response.

“It’s not . . . I mean, it could just be a friendly meal, couldn’t it?”

Francis lowered his eyelids.

“Alright, I suppose not,” Will muttered, unable to fight his smile.

It was a smile that stuck the rest of the day. He was still smiling when he returned home to a chorus of mews and flung himself onto his cot, where he was promptly trampled by cat feet.

Chapter 2

When Will arrived at Hannibal's house again the next week, he felt the slightest tug of nostalgia as he passed the Ravenstag pen. The kitchen window was aglow and Hannibal appeared at the door just as Will set foot on the porch. Will was inwardly elated to discover that Hannibal had shaved, since he'd done the same. What's more, Hannibal was wearing the brooch.

"Come in," Hannibal said, with what Will was beginning to consider his signature warmth.

Any lingering doubts Will had about the nature of the supper vanished when he saw Hannibal's table, draped now with a burgundy tablecloth and topped with a single candle and small bouquet in a charming wooden vase.

"How lovely," Will said, swallowing and glancing around the room.

Something else was different. The candle gave the dim room a new ambiance, but that wasn't it. Something had been rearranged, but he couldn't quite put his finger on—*oh*. All the glass containers were gone. The herbs had been relocated. The contents of the shelves had been shifted to accommodate, but the absence was plain. Will's face burned hot and he had to stifle a laugh. Hannibal clearly had more *surprises* in mind.

"Will? Have I made you uncomfortable?"

Will met Hannibal's gaze and found something close to terror in his eyes. He could practically see him regretting every single decision, from the table setup to shaving to the shelves and all of it. That would not do. Summoning every ounce of his courage, Will stepped forward and seized Hannibal's shirt.

"No," he said, pulling him to his lips.

Hannibal stood stiff for a second and then returned the kiss with fervor, taking hold of Will's shoulders and drawing him forward. A few books tumbled off the shelf nearby. It was a long kiss that left them both breathless and panting.

"Too forward?" Will joked.

Hannibal huffed a laugh and kissed Will's cheek. "Not at all."

"Everything looks beautiful," Will said, soft and earnest now. "And supper smells delicious."

Will took his seat at the table while Hannibal plated their meals. He had prepared pasta shells in a robust tomato sauce, paired with fluffy slices of white bread and wine . . . in wooden goblets. Will was touched, if a little embarrassed, by the lengths Hannibal had gone to ensure his comfort.

"This is incredible," Will said as they ate. "How long have you been cooking?"

"Most of my life. When I was young, there was a tragedy in my family that hit my mother hardest. I started cooking for all of us after that, and I found that I enjoyed it. Around that same time, I first took an interest in medicines, as well. And here I am."

Will nodded. “You have a gift for it, I’d say.”

“I appreciate that,” Hannibal said, sipping his wine. “You said you’ve been in the village a few years; may I ask from where you came?”

“I grew up South of here, in the big cities,” Will answered, maybe too casually. “I don’t intend to return. It didn’t suit me much.”

“Fair enough,” Hannibal said with a smile. “I grew up far from here, myself, and I don’t intend to return, either.”

Will smiled back and they went on eating, the flickering light of the candle flame dancing across Hannibal’s face and sparkling in his eyes. Delicious as the meal was, Will was now preoccupied with what might come after. It had been a while for him, and he had to imagine for Hannibal as well.

When they’d finished eating, Hannibal insisted upon clearing the table. Will blotted his mouth with his napkin a few more times, just to be sure, took a swig of his wine, and stood up just in time to catch Hannibal’s arm as he came back. Without a word, he pulled him into another kiss. Hannibal returned his affection at first, caressing his back and holding him close, but he froze when Will started to untuck his shirt.

“Will,” Hannibal said, gently pulling away.

“Too much?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” Hannibal said, letting his eyes flutter shut and taking a breath. “I only wouldn’t want this to be a . . . fleeting dalliance.”

Will smiled and studied his face. “Then we want the same thing. Hannibal, whether you take me to bed tonight or not, I fully expect that this is only the beginning for us.”

“I suppose that settles it,” Hannibal breathed, and he was on him again, kissing him and holding him now with so much passion that Will realized he must have been holding back before. Two of the dining chairs fell over.

In Hannibal’s bedroom, they tore at each other’s clothes and made love while the bed frame quivered and more books tumbled from the shelves. Lying under the sheets together afterward, Hannibal seemed to survey the damage.

“Do you ever move things on purpose? Besides feathers, I mean?”

Will chuckled. “Sure.”

He glanced over at the shelf and made a book flop over and flip through its own pages.

“Anything larger than a book? Could you lift me?”

Will scoffed. “It would be simpler to lift you with my arms.”

“I might enjoy that.”

Will brushed Hannibal’s silver strands of hair away from his eyes. “You know, you’re a lot different than I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

A smile tugged at Will’s lips. “I don’t know. Certainly not this.”

Will kissed him again and Hannibal’s arms encircled him, bringing their bare chests together. The shelves were still this time.

A short while later, wearing only his trousers, Will ventured into the kitchen for a glass of water while Hannibal was otherwise occupied. Sipping his glass, he wandered beyond the shelves and found a cozy living area on the other side. The front of the house was Hannibal’s shop, where he sold his supplements and remedies and whatever else—Will could see the sales counter from where he stood. The small lounging space there in the middle of the house consisted of more bookshelves, reading lamps, and a sofa and chairs arranged around a charming red rug, flanked by a window with a cushioned sill.

He smiled to think of the evenings Hannibal spent there, absorbed perhaps in some scientific text as the sky outside grew dark. He pictured him there, on the sofa, turning pages until he dozed off. But something about the mental image surprised him—without realizing it, he’d removed the red rug from the floor. Odd, he thought, but surveying the room, it did seem just the slightest bit out of place. As though it were brand new. Curious. Glancing behind him to confirm he was still alone, he casually flicked his finger so that the corner of the rug flapped up and then fell flat again. His heart jumped—there was a lock on the floor underneath. A trap door. Perhaps Hannibal was a bit mysterious after all.

“Naturally curious, aren’t you?” came Hannibal’s voice behind him.

Some of Will’s water sloshed to the floor. He turned. “I’m sorry. It’s really none of my business.”

Hannibal smiled. “Actually, since you’ve found it anyway, I’d like to show you.”

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Will watched as Hannibal rolled the carpet away and produced a key for the lock in the floor. He had redressed, and Will felt the slightest bit conspicuous without his own shirt. Lifting up the hatch door, Hannibal revealed a small staircase leading into what Will could only imagine as a dark dungeon. He swallowed.

Will’s face must have given him away, because Hannibal turned to him and smirked. “I’ll go first and get the lights.”

Will nodded. Hannibal descended the steps, disappearing into the cellar. There came a sound like some sort of lever being pushed, and suddenly, golden light spilled from the opening. Will was too curious to turn away now. Treading cautiously, he stepped down. He found the room oddly bright and realized it was illuminated by glowing orbs bordering the ceiling on all sides. He hadn't seen anything like that outside of the cities. As he got to the bottom and his eyes adjusted, Hannibal extended his hand to help him down.

"What is this place?" Will asked.

Hannibal stepped aside and gestured toward the shelves behind him—rows and rows like a library, only these were stocked with bottles. Corked bottles every color of the rainbow, each no larger than Will's palm, all meticulously labeled. *Glass* bottles.

"In addition to other things, I am a collector of potions," Hannibal explained, as though it were a perfectly reasonable hobby and he didn't have well over 400 bottles organized before them, many likely of dubious legal status.

"Are you . . . certain you want *me* down here?"

Hannibal smiled and held up his hands. "I'll keep a safe distance. Feel free to take a closer look."

Reluctant though he was, it put Will at ease a bit to know that Hannibal trusted him in such a place, not to mention liked him well enough to share his secret. On he went, browsing the shelves as though he were searching for something. A bottle whose name he could actually read, perhaps.

"Suddenly I regret my rusty Latin," he mused. And then he felt he ought to make a comment of value. "These are remarkable. I've never seen such a vast collection."

"The darker the bottle, the more potent," Hannibal said, plucking a blood red vessel from the shelf. "This one, for instance, can shrink an object or person to half its size."

"Good heavens," Will breathed.

Hannibal replaced the bottle on the shelf. "Whereas . . ." He stepped over to a neighboring shelf and reappeared with a clear bottle. "This one, you should try. A tiny sip."

Hannibal handed him the bottle, eyes glistening with something like mischief. Will gave him a look.

"It's no stronger than a good wine. It's perfectly safe, I promise, and it will only last about a minute. I think you'll find it pleasant. Just a sip."

Will took the bottle, still giving him a look, and glanced at the label: *Delectatio*. He eased the cork out and, tipping his head back, let a single drop fall to his lip, where he licked it off. Hannibal took the bottle back and replaced the cork. Will looked around, then down at his body. Nothing seemed different. A nervous smile crept over his lips.

"How will I know if it's working?"

Hannibal smiled in reply. “It’s working.”

“What?” Will laughed. “How do you kno—” A fit of laughter cut him off. Will shook his head, trying to snap out of it, but he only laughed harder. “Where’d you ev— what the bl—” he stammered, unable to get a sentence out as his chest heaved with laughter.

Abruptly, he was dissolving in giggles, and he sank to the floor to avoid losing his balance. Will thought he heard Hannibal laughing with him, but he couldn’t be sure, and for a few glorious moments, the world was all rosy and good and he laughed and laughed and laughed.

As swiftly as the potion came on, it subsided, and his breathing steadied as his mind cleared. Sighing, he looked up at Hannibal.

“That was incredible,” Will said. “A bit maddening, but incredible. Where do you find such a thing?”

Hannibal extended his hands and helped Will stand up.

“I work with many traders from different regions,” was all Hannibal said in reply. “Careful where you step, angel.”

Will looked down and noticed, for the first time, a broken green bottle by his foot. He blinked in confusion and then realization set in. Looking around, his heart sank. There were two others that had leapt to their deaths, leaving shards and wasted puddles on the floor. He could only guess how expensive or rare they must have been. Awful warmth spread across his face. He hadn’t heard them fall. He couldn’t look at Hannibal.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “Heavens, I knew I shouldn’t be down here.”

“Will, it’s nothing,” came Hannibal’s gentle response. “I gave you the potion. I take responsibility for its effects.”

Will rubbed his hand over his eyes. He couldn’t bear to ask what particular ones he’d destroyed.

“No, it isn’t your fault. . . . You’ve been so kind. And you trusted me. And I ruined it.”

“You didn’t ruin anything,” Hannibal said, placing a hand on Will’s shoulder. “Nothing here is irreplaceable.”

Will shook his head, pulling away from Hannibal’s touch and pushing past him for the stairs. He went back up to the bedroom and retrieved his shirt from the floor, pulling it on. There came the sounds of Hannibal closing up the hatch, and shortly he appeared beside him, pulling him into a swift embrace.

“I hope you’re not going already,” Hannibal said.

Will sighed. “I’ve never had good control of my magic. I’m a walking disaster.”

“You have a remarkable gift, Will,” Hannibal said, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

Will scoffed, but Hannibal went on.

“I hope you’re not sorry you came tonight. I’m very glad you did.”

It hit Will, suddenly, that making such a fuss over his own clumsiness might make him seem ungrateful for the rest of it.

“I’m glad, too,” Will said, finally returning his embrace. “You’ve been so lovely.”

Hannibal got out the cold puddings he’d made for dessert, and they passed the rest of the evening with no further talk of potions or magic. When Will made his goodbyes and thanked Hannibal graciously for such a fine evening, he still felt a twinge of mortification, but he couldn’t bring himself to apologize again while Hannibal was looking at him so fondly.

Returning home, Will scooped up a fluffy gray cat and danced in a circle as it yowled in protest. Somehow, he'd gone from stealing feathers to sharing meals in Hannibal's kitchen to his bedroom. Somehow, this sweet, beautiful man had fallen for him. Somehow, it didn’t even matter that he was so clumsy. Somehow, he himself was already swimming with anticipation of their next meeting. Somehow, somehow. Marveling at his own ridiculousness, he laughed himself to sleep.

Chapter 3

Supper with Hannibal became a weekly habit. He seemed excited to have a regular guest to cook for, and Will was always equally excited to eat. Each meal was different from the last and consistently delicious. Hannibal could have been a chef if not an apothecary. They fell into bed on most visits, too, and Will had never known a lover so adoring and tender. In Hannibal's arms, he felt worshipped. Happily, Will managed not to break anything else.

One chilly night, Hannibal was serving hot cocoa for dessert.

"I have something to ask you," he said, setting a steaming mug in front of Will. "An experiment of sorts, if you're up for it."

"Oh?" Will replied with a raised eyebrow, shooting Hannibal a coy glance as he sipped his drink.

Hannibal might've actually blushed at that, smiling and shaking his head. "Not of that sort."

"Alright, what kind of experiment?"

Hannibal seemed to gather his words and then met Will's gaze again. "One that involves your magic. If you're not opposed to it."

Will's playful mood faded. "I'm listening."

Hannibal set his mug on the table and leaned forward. "I've done a lot of reading on the subject. Magic, that is. Since long before we met. I've always been fascinated by it, though I possess none myself. My understanding is that it's an ability like any other talent, and it can be developed and grown. I wonder if I could help you hone your skills, Will. Even if I can't, it might make for an interesting experiment, as I've said. Of course, if you're opposed to the idea, I won't mention it again."

Hannibal's cautious words made it clear that he'd been wanting to propose the idea to Will for some time. Will had admittedly given him reasons to think magic was a sore subject. Even now, Hannibal looked like he was worried Will might bolt for the door.

"Back in the city," Will started, "I did have a tutor for a while. It didn't go well. But I was much younger then."

Hannibal nodded. "You need not give me an answer now. Take some time to consider it."

Will smiled. "Hannibal, it's a fine idea. It's just. . . . I'm not sure I believe I'm even capable of improving. I'm afraid I'm likely to disappoint you."

"Will," Hannibal said, reaching across the table and taking his hand. "Your company could never possibly be a disappointment to me. Regardless of what you decide."

Will squeezed Hannibal's hand and took another sweet sip of cocoa. "I suppose I haven't got anything to lose."

***

Sometime later, Will found himself in Hannibal's lounge area, an assortment of objects before him on the red rug. Hannibal seemed excited. Will swallowed.

"To begin, perhaps just try lifting each object individually? As something of a warm-up?"

Will nodded. Hopefully he could manage something as simple as that, but Hannibal's unwavering gaze made him a bit uneasy. Nevertheless, he focused his attention on the neat rows of objects and began lifting them one by one, floating them just above the floor and then setting them down again. A book, a candlestick, a spoon, a pot, a serving tray, and on. Each was more or less where Hannibal had set it after Will finished.

"Nicely done," Hannibal said. "Now, what about two at a time?"

Will looked from the rug to Hannibal and back again. He could see the angle he was using. Truth be told, it had been a long while since Will had put his abilities to the test in any way. It might do him some good. Once again, he lifted the objects off the ground, two at a time now, and set them down again. For the most part it went smoothly, though a few things spun in mid-air without his permission.

"What about all at once?" Hannibal asked next.

Will replied with a little chuckle. "I'm not that coordinated, but we'll see."

Taking a breath, he once again reached out with his magical energy and enveloped the group of objects, little ones popping up from the rug more quickly than heavier things. Once he had them all floating, some twirling or trembling in place, he laughed.

"Higher?" Hannibal said.

On command, Will drew them up, slowly, toward the center of the room. But the larger objects trailed, again, and they quickly became a scattered mess floating there. He frowned and set them down again, the original rows ruined. Hannibal came over to him and took Will by the shoulders, turning him to face away from the rug.

"Try it without looking this time."

Will was skeptical, but Hannibal's curiosity was contagious. Shutting his eyes, Will reached out blind, finding the approximate location of the collection on the floor, and enveloping it this time as though it were just one large thing. Indeed, it seemed to come up much more evenly this time. Maybe Hannibal was onto something . . .

"Interesting strategy," Hannibal said.

Will opened his eyes to see Hannibal smiling and then turned around and laughed to see the entire rug floating with all objects still nestled on top. He dropped it a bit abruptly, sending a

few items scattering.

“Oops,” he said, still laughing at himself.

“Not oops, Will. Don’t you see? When you weren’t looking, you found a simpler solution to the task. That shows good instincts.”

Will hummed and slid his arms around Hannibal’s waist. “I think you’re giving me too much credit.” He pressed a kiss to his neck and felt Hannibal melt in his arms. “But you’re sweet.”

The lesson was promptly abandoned but not forgotten. Their experiment continued, and Will’s visits grew more frequent. Sometimes he even stayed overnight, collapsing exhausted into Hannibal’s bed after another evening of making things float. Hannibal continued to come up with clever challenges, but Will seemed to hit a wall with anything heavier than two stone. At that weight, it was much simpler to just lift things with his hands.

Will began to tire of the whole thing, but Hannibal seemed to view it as a fascinating game.

***

One particular evening, while thunder rumbled outside, Will was content to linger at the table after another filling meal. But Hannibal disappeared and shortly thereafter called him into the next room.

When Will followed, he found him there with a large chest at his feet. Will raised an eyebrow.

“I wanted to try something new,” Hannibal explained. “If you’re okay with it. I won’t tell you what’s inside the chest, if anything. Try to lift it as though it’s empty, since it could be.”

“Hannibal,” Will sighed. “You know I can feel the weight as soon as I try. It won’t be a mystery.”

“Humor me.”

“Fine.”

He reached out with his magic again, but the chest wouldn’t budge. He scoffed. It must have been stuffed full of rocks. Hannibal was delusional. Will shook his head. “I can’t move that.”

Hannibal smiled and came over to him. “Close your eyes and try again. I have a theory to test.”

“Of course you do,” Will said, relenting and shutting his eyes.

Reaching out with his magic once more, he was acutely aware of the heavy chest. It may as well have been bolted to the floor. He sighed, increasing his effort, until there came a familiar piercing sensation in his chest, as though he were being slowly speared open by lightning. It happened when he pushed too hard. He clenched his teeth, not letting go, trying to ignore the bright pain, but it was clearly no use.

But then, suddenly, Hannibal's lips were against his and something happened. It felt like a spark. Like the bright spot in his chest flared up, and a flash of light passed behind his eyes.

The chest moved. Will didn't know how much until he heard a bang and opened his eyes to see it land with a second crash, falling open and spilling stacks of bricks. For a moment, Will could only stare at it, his head pounding. Glancing up, there was a visible crack in a board. It had shot up to the ceiling.

"Amazing," Hannibal said, kissing Will's cheek. "That was amazing. I knew there was dormant power in you. You see what you're capable of?"

Hannibal stepped over to the chest and began replacing the bricks, while Will stood quietly stunned and vaguely dizzy. He rubbed his hand across his eyes and sank into one of the chairs. Moments later, Hannibal's hands found Will's knees, and Will opened his eyes to find him squatting down in front of him.

"Are you alright?"

Will shrugged and nodded.

"Do you want to try again, or should we leave it at that for tonight?"

"I think we should leave it at that, period." It came out more bitter than he'd meant it.

Hannibal straightened up. "You're exhausted. Another time."

"What if I don't want to do this anymore, Hannibal? This experiment. Could you let it go?"

Hannibal blinked, seemingly a bit taken aback by Will's tone. "I think we should talk about this another time, angel. I know that was difficult."

"No, you're not listening to me," Will said, standing up. "That was an *accident*, what happened just now. I *can't* lift heavy things, not intentionally, and I'm done trying."

"Will, how can you want to stop just when you've made such a breakthrough?"

Will huffed an agitated breath. "That wasn't a breakthrough. And why is it so important to you, anyway? What does it matter if we stop?"

Hannibal simply regarded him, his face stern in a way Will had never seen before. "I thought this would be mutually beneficial, Will. But it's up to you if we continue, of course. I'm not going to insist on it. I only hope that you'll give it some thought. See how you feel in the morning, after you've rested."

Tears of frustration clouded Will's vision. Why was Hannibal being so damn stubborn about this? His head spun as he recalled all the times Hannibal had seemed allured by his magic, his potential, even before the experiment began. He'd always been oddly fixated on it—Will could see that, now. He crossed his arms. "And if I still want to stop tomorrow?"

"Then we stop."

“Will you still want to see me?”

“Will . . . how can you ask me that?” Hannibal asked, his voice small.

“That’s not an answer,” Will said. A tear dripped down his cheek.

“Of course I’ll want to see you,” said Hannibal, stepping toward him again. “I wouldn’t trade your companionship for anything. I don’t care if you swear off magic for good.”

Will scoffed at the hyperbole. Hannibal moved to embrace him, but Will pulled away, shaking his head. “I’m going home for the night.”

“Alright,” came Hannibal’s reply, standing still as a statue as Will turned to go. “I’m sorry, Will.”

***

Will wiped his face on his sleeve as he headed out across the grass, the dark sky rumbling above. He realized he would have liked it if Hannibal had chased after him and begged him to stay, and he chided himself for the childish thought. He really did need to get some rest.

Coming down the hill toward home, rain started to fall. As though the sky was mocking him.

Lightning flashed as his house came into view, and something stopped him in his tracks. He’d only seen a glimpse, but there was *something* next to his house. Something large. He waited a moment, his heart pounding, and when the next flash of light came, he caught sight of a shiny red lump . . . with a tail. Francis.

Will ran on with newfound urgency. He found his way around to Francis’s head, where he was lying in the grass beneath the trees by the riverbank. Even in the dim light, Will could see that his face was pained.

“Francis?” he said, placing a careful hand on his smooth neck.

The dragon opened his eyes and lifted his head to look at Will, only to let it drop again, letting out a strained groan. Will hadn’t seen Francis at the market for two days, but he hadn’t thought anything of it, assuming he was off on dragon business. He felt a swell of guilt for not being more concerned, and for not coming home the previous night. How long had Francis waited for him there?

“Francis, what happened to you? Are you hurt?”

Francis spoke in response, or seemed to; the sound was closer to a series of bellows than words. Will sank to his knees, letting his head rest against the dragon’s scales. Bitter sobs wracked through him. Useless. His friend needed help, and he was utterly useless, because of course he wasn’t powerful enough to understand him. He wasn’t powerful enough to do anything that mattered.

“I’m going to go get help,” he said, rubbing his hand over Francis’s shoulder. “I’ll be back as quickly—”

Francis cut him off with a whine of despair. Will's heart ached. He'd already been alone for so long.

"Alright," Will said. "I won't leave you. I'll stay."

Rain was falling at a steady rate. Will sank to his knees again, keeping a hand on Francis's scales. If only he could get a message to Hannibal somehow. Glancing up, he spotted one of the cats in the window. She mewed, voice muffled by the raindrops. If he told her where to go, she might understand. Or she might get lost in the rain. Or she might just ignore him.

He looked down at Francis again. The dragon's breathing was labored and choppy. Whatever had happened to him, he wasn't going to make it if Will didn't do something. In his time of need, Francis had come to him because he was a friend. If only Will could do something with his magic to help him. If only he were strong enough. . . .

Will internally scoffed at the thought. He could barely lift a box of bricks except by accident. There was no way he could manage a dragon. Then again, the box had caught him by surprise. He stood up, surveying Francis again, entertaining the absurd notion just to avoid giving up a little longer. Considering it logically, if he could only get Francis to float above the ground, he'd be able to push him onward with his hands. But Hannibal's house was a long walk. And even if it were a short walk, lifting a dragon was ridiculous.

Will rubbed his hands over his face. He had to try. He had to at least try. He took a breath and closed his eyes, reaching out with his magic. Not a budge. Francis was even heavier than he looked. And then Will remembered something: the test with the scattered objects. Perhaps he needed to think of Francis in a different way. Instead of one great mass, he was a cluster of objects. That strategy got his head, limbs, and tail floating, but still, the body wouldn't budge. Will let him settle down gently. Francis sighed.

Will turned away, tears mixing with rain on his cheeks. He faced the river, closed his eyes and listened to the rushing water and the crash of thunder. He was missing something. There had to be something he could do. The rug, he thought. The scattered objects had been much easier when he'd used the rug to lift them. Maybe if he focused his energy beneath Francis, he could lift him with an imaginary rug. . . . There came the bright dagger of pain in his chest as he tried it. And then he remembered something else: the spark. He needed another spark. Not letting go, he recalled the feeling of Hannibal's lips against his so suddenly.

From behind Will, there came a startled grunt, and when he turned around, his jaw dropped. Francis was hovering—*hovering*—just above the ground, gently wobbling in place. It was working. He put a bit more effort into it, to get him a little higher. The bright spot in his chest was tugging at him, telling him it was too much, but he pushed back, using it as leverage as he hoisted Francis to waist level. Now *this* was a breakthrough.

Will took hold of his shoulders and started pushing. He quickly realized that he had to keep a slow pace or he might lose grasp with his magic. But this was doable. He could do this.

"I'm going to help you, Francis," he said.

Pressing onward, he set foot out into the downpour. The bright dagger bit sharper and deeper than ever, and Will's hold waned a few times, so that he had to let Francis bob in the air while he regained control. Never in his life had he pushed so hard. Nor had he any reason until now. Bolts of pain spread through his body like lightning, and by the time he was over the hill, he could no longer see, his vision blocked out by a solid glow. He knew the way well enough to forge on the right direction. Soon, the pounding of his own heartbeat drowned out the rain and the thunder and each footstep through the puddles of rainwater was all that told him he was moving.

Will collapsed, and the world came back. He was lying in the grass. It was still raining. Francis was next to him, breathing. They had made it as far as the Ravenstag pen. They had made it. He tried to call out Hannibal's name, but his voice was too small. He had to get to his feet, he had to—

"Will!" came Hannibal's voice through the rain as quick footsteps splashed toward him.

Hannibal pulled him into his arms and touched Will's cheek. "Will, talk to me."

"I'm alright," Will choked out. "Can you help him?"

Hannibal eased Will back down and stepped over to Francis, who made gave a nervous little rumble. Kneeling, Hannibal pressed his ear to Francis's side and listened. Will swallowed. He hadn't thought to do that. Hannibal straightened up and looked over at him again. His face seemed blank. Will's heart sank. He held his breath, steeling himself against the awful words that might come next.

"I'll be just a moment," was what Hannibal said. He got to his feet and dashed inside.

Will blinked, chest swelling with hope. Getting to his knees, he crawled over to Francis, dragging himself through the mud, and sat at his side, resting his head on the dragon's scales. Hannibal returned shortly and came over to Will.

"Can you get him to drink this?" Hannibal said, producing a tiny potion bottle black as tar and just as opaque.

Will did a double-take. He hadn't seen any bottles so dark on his one foray into the cellar, nor any so small. Hannibal showed no sign of hesitation, giving up freely what must have been one of his most valuable possessions.

"It will save him," Hannibal went on. "But there's a single drop inside. You must make sure he gets it."

Will took the bottle, holding Hannibal's gaze for a moment before he crept around to Francis's face, lifting his head into his lap.

"This will save you, my friend," he started. "If you want it, open your mouth for me."

Francis let out a long sigh and then, slowly, rotated his head and let his jaw drop ever so slightly. Gingerly, Will pulled the cork out of the little bottle and tipped it right over Francis's

tongue, watching the single droplet fall.

The change came in an instant. Francis clamped his jaw shut and lifted his head up to his neck's full height, gazing down at Will with clear eyes. Will smiled. Francis got to his feet, stood tall and strong, and then bowed. He turned and did the same toward Hannibal. With that, the dragon walked up toward the house, crouching down in the grass by the porch, where he curled up tight like a cat, head under wing.

Will's chest heaved with a great sigh of relief, and he let himself go limp again, only for Hannibal's arms to scoop him up. Cradling him against his chest, Hannibal carried him inside, both of them soaked through, and laid him gently on the sofa before he was gone again. Tired as Will was, his head was swimming, and he was standing by the time Hannibal returned with an armful of towels, which he set on a chair, stepping around the open cellar door as he came back toward Will.

Will pulled Hannibal into an embrace, collapsing into him and holding him more tightly than ever before. Hannibal returned the hug, supporting his weight and stroking Will's back.

"Thank you," Will whispered against Hannibal's damp shirt. His vision had gone blurry again.

"I would do anything for you, darling. I'm glad you came to me."

"I love you," Will said, tears falling freely. "I love you."

"And I love you, Will," came Hannibal's response, his voice catching. "I'm sorry if I ever gave you reason to doubt that. I never wanted to change you. Only to help you."

***

Will awoke the next morning to harsh daylight spilling in through Hannibal's curtains. He was alone, wearing Hannibal's pajamas. He vaguely recalled how Hannibal had helped him undress and dried the rain from his skin before helping him into the dry clothes and getting him to bed. But not without drinking a cup of water first. . . . At recalling it, he hopped out of bed and dashed for the loo.

His head was pounding, but his legs and lungs were steady. He found Hannibal in the kitchen, holding a mug and gazing out the window.

"Will," Hannibal said with that warm smile, "You're up. I didn't want to wake you. The porridge is still warm, if you're hungry."

At the thought of food, Will's stomach growled like a dragon. He nodded, and Hannibal opened the cupboard for a bowl. Will glanced out into the yard and saw Francis still there, sitting and having a curious look at the Ravenstags, which were all huddled on the other side of the pen.

Will sank into one of the chairs at the kitchen table and watched as Hannibal stirred cream and nuts into the bowl of porridge, adding sliced apple on top before setting it before him.

The smell was heavenly, and Will fell upon it like he did with everything Hannibal cooked, filling his mouth with large spoonfuls.

“It’s delicious,” he said. “Thank you.”

Hannibal placed a hand on Will's shoulder. "You're very welcome. I owe you an apology, Will."

A pang of guilt shot through him. Will shook his head, setting his spoon down. "I was awful to you."

"You were right. I wasn't listening to what you were telling me. But I think, in the end, we were actually afraid of the same thing."

Will wasn't following. He looked up at him. Hannibal took a seat next to him, bringing them eye to eye.

"I wasn't inviting you over to work on magic. . . . The truth is, I proposed the experiment as a means to getting you to spend more time here."

Will smiled. Hannibal looked sheepish.

"Admittedly, I did get a bit fixated on it," he went on. “But it was never what really mattered. I’m sorry, Will. It’s been a long while since I’ve cared for another person the way I care for you. You’ve brought me great happiness, and I’ve only ever wanted to do the same.”

Will could hardly believe Hannibal was the one apologizing. He never could have moved the dragon without Hannibal’s lessons, a fact Will knew Hannibal was well aware of. Instead of speaking, he stood from his chair and scooted into Hannibal’s lap, taking his sweet face in his hand. Will let his eyes linger a moment before he kissed him, grasping his nape, the way he thought Hannibal ought to be kissed every day.

“I love you, Hannibal,” Will said, breathless. “You have me.”

Chapter 4

Epilogue

It was high noon and the market was bustling with customers from near and far. The sun was bright and the air was crisp, and everywhere Will looked, people were smiling and carrying armfuls of new parcels. Reba's candle shop was popular as ever, and Sheriff Katz nodded hello as she passed, seemingly giving Will a once-over and taking notice of his new clothes.

Will had his own arms full with sacks of groceries, weaving through the crowds on his way home—through the village instead of toward the river these days. Returning, he slinked around back to avoid pushing past the line of apothecary customers extending out the door and beyond the porch. He found Francis waiting expectantly in the grass by his charred trough.

"It was a bit crowded, but I think you'll find it worth the wait," Will said, setting his bags on the ground and retrieving the wrapped meats from the butcher.

He stripped off the brown paper and set each thick cut into the trough. The dragon sniffed his snack and then, with care, roasted the meat with his fire breath in a matter of seconds, gobbling it up just as quick. He made a satisfied rumble and bumped Will with his nose.

"I'm glad you liked it," Will laughed.

Over in the pen, the Ravenstags were calm; they'd grown used to the presence of the dragon. Francis seemed keen on calling Hannibal's plot of land his home now. He and Will had that in common.

Will collected his bags and leapt up the steps and into the kitchen, where he put away the purchases that would become that night's supper. The gray cat was lounging on the window sill and looked a bit miffed at having her nap interrupted. He gave her a pat and she squeaked a little trill in reply. Just as Will had folded the empty bags and tucked them into the cupboard, Hannibal's arms encircled his waist from behind. A cup of cherries tipped over and then abruptly righted itself, sending a few fruits flying.

"You're back," Hannibal said, stating the obvious as he kissed Will's neck.

Will hummed. "I brought you something."

Turning around, he presented the white rose he'd picked up in the markets—the fresh flower vendor was too tempting to pass up. Hannibal smiled and smelled the bloom.

"Lovely," Hannibal said, kissing him again. "Thank you."

"What are you doing back here?" Will laughed. "Haven't you got a line?"

“Do you have more of these ready?” Hannibal asked, tapping his feather brooch. “We sold out again, and they’re asking.”

“Ah yes, I’ve a few more in my trunk,” Will said, starting to turn away. “I’ll go and fetch—”

Hannibal caught his arm and pulled him into another embrace, meeting his lips once again. Will laughed in the kiss, and they only parted when some impatient soul rang the bell up front.

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